

Leesburg Airport Expansion Plans Are on the Fast Track

The Leesburg Regional Airport has grown from a military training field to a busy regional airport and commerce center.



One of six jets housed at Leesburg Regional Airport

Five years ago, the City of Leesburg changed the course of the airport from primarily a local airfield to a regional airport designed to support regional general aviation needs within Metro Orlando. As a result of the shift in philosophy, City staff and consultants have been planning major upgrades to the airport.



Charlie Weller, Airport Manager at new Airport Entrance Sign

Projects completed this year include taxiway overlays, construction of eleven T-hangars, increased security lighting, overall landscaping upgrades, and a new Airport entrance sign.

In early 2004, construction will start on a 4,000 square foot line service building. The line service building will serve as a welcome center and provide a base for pilots. The line service building will feature a pilot's lounge, comfortable waiting room and flight planning area with a state-of-the-art weather system. "Providing first class facilities for pilot down-time is a major priority for the new facility. We are working hard to make this the best regional airport in Central Florida", states Airport Manager, Charlie Weller.



Line Service Building (4,000 sq. ft.) to be constructed early 2004

Additional projects scheduled for 2004 include an air traffic control tower, installation of automated landing guidance equipment and a fire rescue station. All of these safety improvements coupled with planned runway extensions will result in increased jet traffic at the airport.

In 1980, the Airport reported 78 based aircraft. Currently, more than 200 aircraft are stationed at the airport, including five jet aircraft. “We could easily double the number of aircrafts and landings that occur annually at Leesburg due to our aggressive improvement program”, states Robert Johnson, Deputy City Manager.

The Airport’s hangar space has grown dramatically over the last several years. Today, there are two corporate hangars, 89 T-hangars and 61 conventional hangars.

The Airport while relatively small in size (818 acres) has made up for it in its location, positioned immediately adjacent to U. S. 441, a major state road. As a result, the City has been aggressively purchasing commercial property situated between the airport and U. S. 441. Today, the City owns 32 acres of prime commercial property located right on U. S. 441, which the City has turned around and leased to a variety of private commercial ventures.

On Airport property nowadays, there are two car dealerships, a doctor’s office, a home design center, Cracker Barrel Restaurant, and a Ruby Tuesday Restaurant. The most recent commercial property addition is a 40,000 square foot facility that was previously a Service Merchandise facility. The site at present is available for lease and the City is marketing this facility to stand alone discount retailers.

According to Robert Johnson “the ability to obtain grant funds to assist with the purchase of the commercial property helps to secure property for the Airport’s future, while providing income to assist with airport operational costs.” The City brings in more

revenue from the Airport's commercial ventures than it does from Airport property leases.

The Airport, while being a transportation center, is also a center of commerce and employment in this fast growing region of the State of Florida. Businesses gain exposure to Lake County through our Airport, and associated users and businesses create and sustain jobs in Lake County. There are some 1,000 annual business operations into and out of Leesburg and 800 are enacted by jets.

Leesburg Regional Airport allows the City to diversify its economy with aeronautical-related industries, which are often associated with high-paying jobs. There are 305 jobs on Airport property, of which 88 are aeronautical positions.

Airport tenants, whose businesses rely heavily on the airport include: Aerostat, Inc., Skybolt Aeromotive and Brainerd Helicopters, Inc. Aerostat is a national manufacturer of aerial fire fighting equipment used for controlled burnout by the military and U.S. Dept. of Forestry. Skybolt supplies innovative stainless steel fasteners to the aircraft and the racing industries. Brainerd presents the "Firehawk", the world's first commercial Black Hawk helicopter. A specialty of the Firehawk includes fire fighting with a water bucket and a passenger rescue basket.

In addition to the facility improvements and commercial endeavors, the City has also recognized the international potential of a regional airport in Central Florida. By partnering with the City of Ocala, the City of Leesburg will offer U.S. Customs and Border Protection Inspection at the Airport. This allows in-bound international flights to land directly in Leesburg. "Currently, there are several planes based at Leesburg that must land first in Sanford or Orlando for customs review. Providing this service in Leesburg will increase our in-bound traffic and increase our fuel sales at the airport," states Mr. Weller.

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